

# Democratic backsliding in the United States - Handout

## What is democracy?

| Minimalist definition   | Maximalist definition   |
|---|---|
| Definition: Citizens are free to choose their government  | Democracy is a method for realizing certain extrinsic values, like representation, accountability, justice, dignity |
| Democracy is a method for processing conflicts in a society   |   |
| Problem: Certain decisions are hard to assess using minimalist criteria.<br>Example: Letting more people vote, because you know they vote for your party. | Problem: There are different "maximalist" definitions of democracy, because people value different ideals           |

## Central Aspects

- Respect for human rights
- Multi-party political system
- Honesty and valuing of the truth
- Equal and respected voting system
- Respect for the rule of law
- Free courts
- Freedom of speech

## What is democratic Backsliding?

**Definition:** State-led weakening or elimination of the political institution and conditions, that sustain an existing democracy

- Happens slowly and incrementally
- Often comes wrapped in legality
- Sign: Independent institutions, like courts start enabling governmental acts without question
- Often justified by one of these reasons:
  - Fighting threats to national security or public order
  - Checking rampant corruption
- Correcting supposed electoral irregularities

## Democratic Backsliding under Donald Trump

### Tactics that Trump uses to weaken Democracy

#### Increasing his power by:

- Using a lot of executive orders
- Firing government workers
- Placing loyalists in important governmental positions
- Firing people, who disagree with him

#### Ignoring existing law; Examples:

- Illegally invading Venezuela
- Deporting student protesters without trial
- Not fully releasing the Epstein-Documents

#### Undermining trust in democratic institutions; Examples:

- Denying the 2020 election results
- Describing media that criticizes him as “fake news”
- Accusing judges that restrict his unconstitutional acts to be “ideologically motivated”
- Normalizing the use of antidemocratic language and symbols, like showing the Hitler-Salute

#### Gerrymandering

- The state legislature controls the drawing of voting districts
- Definition: Drawing voting districts in a way, that benefits your own party

#### Partisan institutions

- The supreme court is controlled by a republican majority, has reinterpreted some laws to benefit Trump
- DOJ (Department of Justice) and FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) are lead by Trump-Loyalists
- The national guard (federal military) and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) are used to carry out Trumps political will; Example: national guard being sent to democrat cities to “fight the enemy from within”



## Obstacles to Trumps Project

### Strong federalism

- State governments control central aspects of education, law enforcement and civil society
- States can challenge federal laws in court
- 36% of Americans live in states, where legislature (creation of laws) and executive (carrying out of laws) are controlled by democrats

### Judges that fight back

- Judges have blocked 35 national orders from Trump (as of August 2025); Examples:
  - Blocking the defunding of USAID (Agency of International Development)
  - Upholding the right to birthright citizenship

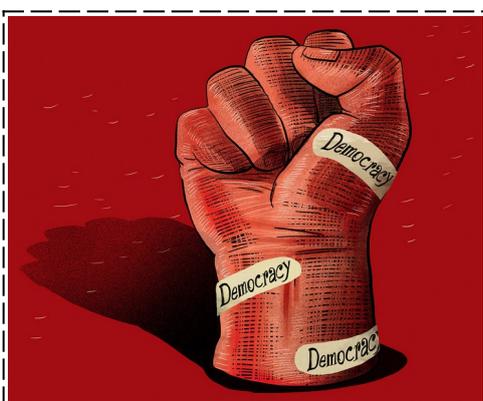
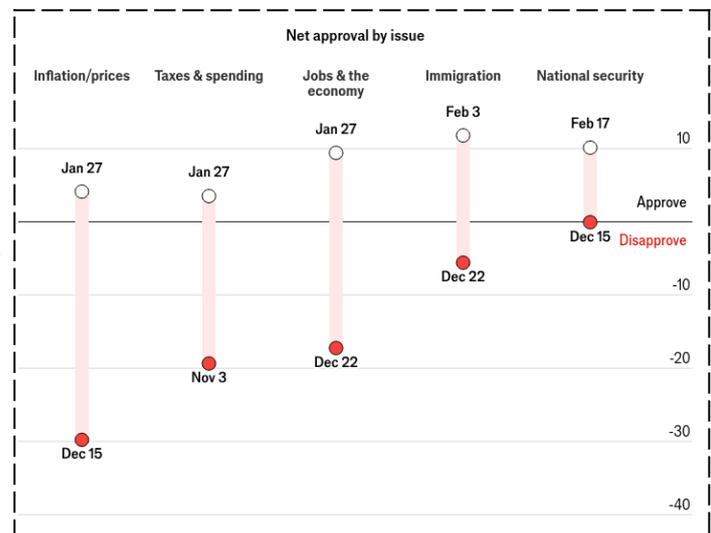
### America is too diverse

- Many Americans still see the United States as a “Melting pot”; 82% believe that diversity makes America stronger
- 73% of Americans believe that freedom is very important to society
- Makes it harder to take freedom away or justify fascist or racist policies

### Direct negative impact of bad policy

- Inflation and high prices after tariffs
- Cuts to healthcare subsidies
- Rising unemployment

→ This makes his voters unhappy and will significantly weaken the Republicans chances in the next elections



Sources

